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ABSTRACT

Schools and school districts across the United States are establishing and expanding foreign language programs. Although most programs are found at the secondary school level, an increasing number are being established in elementary schools. A survey by the Center for Applied Linguistics indicates that 31% of U.S. elementary schools are offering foreign language instruction, up from 22% a decade ago. In the late 1990s, the U.S. Department of Education funded an effort to identify early foreign language programs that could serve as models for schools or districts interested in establishing or enhancing early-start, long-sequence foreign language programs. Seven model programs were identified through a nomination and selection process informed by the national standards for foreign language education and by research on effective language instruction for elementary and middle school students. The programs selected met specified criteria in the areas of curriculum, outcomes, ongoing evaluation, coordination with content areas, articulation from elementary to secondary school, accessibility, student diversity, professional development opportunities, and community support. Although the seven programs represent a range of program models and instructional strategies, they had a number of critical elements in common. This digest describes these elements, which are deemed key to the long-term success of early foreign language programs. (VWL)

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Model Early Foreign Language Programs: Key Elements

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Schools and school districts across the United States are establishing and expanding foreign language programs. Although most programs are found at the secondary school level, an increasing number are being established in elementary schools. A survey by the Center for Applied Linguistics indicates that 31% of U.S. elementary schools are offering foreign language instruction, up from 22% a decade ago (Rhodes & Branaman, 1999).

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National Foreign Language Standards

All seven programs have incorporated the five Cs of the national standards (communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, communities) into their curriculum. In some districts, the five Cs explicitly form a core element of the foreign language curricula for all grades. In others, the content-related curricula address the standards in an integrated, almost organic way. Interestingly, none of the programs has adopted textbooks to form the core of its instructional program. Rather, materials are identified or developed that connect language learning to the immediate context or to specific lessons in the regular curriculum.

A Focus on Content

All seven of the model programs use content-based or content-enriched curricula that are closely tied to the general elementary school curriculum. *Content-based* programs are those in which one or more subjects are taught in the foreign language. Immersion programs, in which some or all academic subjects are taught in the foreign language, are content based. *Content-enriched* programs are those in which language lessons include concepts from subjects such as math, science, and geography, mostly as reinforcement of subject matter classes taught in English. Students in a third-grade Spanish class in Toledo, Ohio, for example, learn about the growth processes of a plant through a Total Physical Response activity conducted entirely in Spanish, then read a Spanish news article on the same topic.

Articulation and Alignment

Language instruction in the elementary grades frequently emphasizes creative activities that involve oral communication; there is not a strong focus on accuracy or written language. As a result, there can be a disconnect when students move to the higher grades, where there is more emphasis on grammar, writing, and formal assessment. The challenge is compounded in decentralized districts, where a school-based management approach may favor institutional autonomy at the expense of articulation with programs in other schools. The seven model programs address this challenge through meetings, teaching exchanges, and standardization of curricula and assessment. In Glastonbury, Connecticut, for example, curriculum goals for languages are standardized across all eight schools in the district. Meetings are held not only with the district's foreign language teachers and administrators, but also with staff at the University of Connecticut to enhance the transition to higher education for secondary students. Another way in which this district strengthens articulation and alignment is through an innovative program of exchange teaching. From time to time, the foreign language teachers trade classes—elementary school teachers move to a high school and vice versa.

Effective Teaching Methods

Teachers in the seven programs keep their students motivated through age-appropriate, enjoyable lesson activities, many involving pair- or small-group work. In the elementary grades, songs are popular, especially those that fit new lyrics to familiar tunes. Most activities have a strong focus on communication and student interaction and a minimum of "listen and repeat after me" instruction. Teachers have devised creative guessing games and simulations that educate, entertain, and motivate learners and that bring together students from different grade levels. Fourth graders at Ephesus Road Elementary School in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, for example, help first graders review French numbers, animals, colors, and verbs of motion by leading them in a guessing game using numbered animal puppets. In a fifth-grade class at the same school, the French teacher tells the story of a mother moose in eastern Canada traveling to the west coast to be united with its baby moose. Students in small groups move a moose figure across maps and answer questions about geographic regions and time zones as they listen to the story.

Appropriate Use of Technology

Training staff in the effective use of computer-based resources is a major focus of in-service staff development in nearly every one of the seven programs. Districts are also increasing younger learners' access to computers. Ephesus Road Elementary School in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, is notable in its use of interactive Web-based communication with other French language programs around the world through "Ethnokids" (www.ethnokids.net). This is a joint effort of teachers and students at dozens of elementary schools in countries around the world, including Belgium, Vietnam, Guyana, and Côte d'Ivoire. Students from each participating school contribute essays, drawings, and descriptions of celebrations, homes, and schools—all in French.

Student Assessment

Although all of the model programs have a strong assessment component, specific assessment practices vary widely from one program to the next. Bay Point Elementary School in Pinellas County, Florida, uses a Home Assessment System that involves parents, regular classroom teachers, and FLES teachers in the students' language learning process and allows students to proceed at their own pace. Students are given task cards that indicate specific activities that they need to be able to do (e.g., "I can describe the contents of my backpack"). There are 10 levels of tasks, with 10 tasks at each level. As children demonstrate the tasks at home, their parents sign the task cards, which the students then file in the classroom, providing a portfolio of their foreign language performance. The teacher quizzes students in class to confirm their ability to carry out the tasks.

To assess progress in speaking and listening skills in the partial immersion Japanese program at Richmond Elementary School in Portland, Oregon, teachers conduct a one-on-one interview with each student at the end of the school year. In kindergarten, each student brings a blank videotape to school which is then used in succeeding years to record the interviews. In the earlier grades, the interviews are simple exchanges of questions and answers, but by fifth grade, the interviews are conducted according to Oregon Japanese Oral Proficiency procedures, resulting in a 15-minute ratable performance sample. This tape follows the students to middle school, where at least one additional interview is recorded.

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Funding

Establishing and maintaining an early-start, long-sequence foreign language program costs money. Most of the model programs have received grant funds from state or federal sources, particularly during the start-up phase. The pre-implementation and early implementation years of foreign language programs require the greatest concentration of resources. Curricula and evaluation procedures must be developed, books and other instructional materials must be purchased, and teachers must be recruited and trained. Most programs have been able to diversify and localize much of their funding as they mature, turning to federal and state grants for special needs such as program evaluation, articulation with postsecondary programs, or expanded use of technology.

Professional Development

Professional development is particularly critical during the early stages of a foreign language program but continues to be important as programs mature, curricula change, and new technology is introduced. Professional development opportunities offered by the model programs include demonstration lessons, in-service workshops, and participation in professional association conferences. The program in Toledo, Ohio, has offered its teachers a low-cost summer language camp; teachers in Prince George's County, Maryland, take university courses taught by the district's foreign language supervisor.

Advocacy

Outreach to the community, visibility at the school and district levels, and involvement of parents have been important to initiating programs, expanding them, and keeping them going during times of tight budgets. In most cases, advocacy for the programs involves media attention. All seven model programs have been featured on local television stations and in newspaper articles. Program newsletters and foreign language fairs are among the ways that program staff have captured and kept community support. Political connections are also important to these programs. The superintendent in Springfield, Massachusetts, is a major advocate for early foreign language education; in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, two foreign language teachers have served on the school governance committee of Ephesus Road Elementary for several years. Having the support of individuals and groups who are in a position to influence the future of the foreign language programs can be crucial to their long-term success.

Conclusion

It is clear that many qualities and characteristics contribute to the success of early foreign language programs. In addition to those described above, the seven model programs have demonstrated flexibility, teamwork, leadership, and commitment. They have adapted to changes brought about by unanticipated events, including diminished funding. They have forged close working relationships with district superintendents, members of the board of education, school principals, regular classroom teachers, parents, and others in the community. They have strong leaders with a vision of foreign language teaching and learning who know how to inspire others and organize the people and resources necessary to build an effective program. Finally, everyone involved has a deep commitment to the program and to the goal of providing effective foreign language education for young learners.

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Model Early Foreign Language Programs

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